

## Playmaker

by MadameMorganLeFay

Category: High School Musical

Genre: Drama, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Kelsi N., Troy B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-09-24 20:01:03

Updated: 2018-09-23 18:25:24

Packaged: 2018-11-13 02:10:07

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 20,725

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Story URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12664552/1/>

Author URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/4891360/MadameMorganLeFay>

Summary: "If everyone knew that Troy Bolton and Gabriella Montez had the perfect relationship, why didn't he feel it?" The crumbling façade of Troy Bolton's relationship overshadows life at UC Berkeley. Only Kelsi Nielsen, 3000 miles away, can heal the growing pain- but he just can't admit it. Canon AU, set after HSM III.

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### 1. Chapter I: Speed

\*\*CHAPTER I: SPEED\*\*

\* \* \*

42-38.

Never had defeat tasted so bitter.

But rather than ruminating, Troy should have watched his speedometer, given that as he drove off Dumbarton Bridge and onto Hacker Way, he was breaking the law. In fact, he had been violating the speed limit since entering the Nimitz Freeway.

Perhaps he could be forgiven; encroaching darkness combined with glaring street lamps obscured his dashboard. Apart from his engine's wheezing, the only other thing he heard was Dream On by Aerosmith, the chords reverberating through his truck and worsening his headache. Had he not longed

to lurch past the lorry crawling in front, he'd have switched off the radio- but that meant moving an arm. Both were stiff and sore from the game, crying out for an ice pack.

Thus he only had time enough to consider the cruelty of 42-38. It couldn't have happened- he'd scored the equalizer, saving Berkeley's beleaguered CalBears from losing by more than a two-pointer overall. Job done. And then, in the blink of an eye, Stevenson from CUNY, the Stevenson who fouled him not ten minutes beforehand and was lucky to remain on court, stole the ball and scored the winning basket mere seconds before the whistle. Seconds!

Even now, speeding away from Berkeley like a fugitive from a crime scene, he wanted to snatch back time to a moment where he might have obstructed Stevenson, or allowed a teammate to score, maybe Eastwood... Or something. Just at least ten more seconds and Berkeley would have retained some self-respect after a third consecutive loss. Instead, the changing-rooms felt like a graveyard afterwards, each team-member a headstone planted into the lino floor. Every cheerleader who'd showered him with praise pre-match wandered off to watch the football instead, leaving a trail of crumpled pompoms littered everywhere. As if adding insult to injury, the football CalBears won their match- a decisive victory, the coach said.

Now cheerleaders weren't known for their loyalty, but still...

A siren cut through his thoughts, unusually loud. Probably some idiot on a high speed chase- no shortage of those around here. The lorry in front sped up a little and then disappeared at the next left turn. Hallelujah. Enjoying the free space, he gazed at Facebook HQ's electric sign for a moment before turning his attention back to the road.

Nearly there.

Not that it made much difference; already an hour late, he had no excuse convincing enough to appease Gabriella. Maybe she suspected that he'd fail to make it on time- again. His stomach twisted into the same knots as when he watched Stevenson sprint towards the hoop in those final moments, brushing Berkeley's defence away like flies.

In the passenger seat lay a rose bouquet, a box containing triple-layered chocolate cake, and a birthday card. A bottle of blackcurrant cordial peeked out of his backpack. It was safer that way; last time he travelled with an unsecured bottle of nonalcoholic Sangria (which cost a mint), it smashed. Gabriella had complained about the odour all the way to the movie theatre, accusing him of drink-driving and lecturing him about the consequences.

She often reprimanded him... which was fair enough, given her immersion in Pre-Law classes. How many other students aced every single subject in their sleep, or got admitted into Stanford's Freshman Honors Program? He was lucky to have a girlfriend destined for a high-powered legal career, probably charging \$800 to win a divorce case, or getting crack-using celebrities a slap on the wrist. The fact that he was late- again- on her birthday, no less, made him even more pathetic than when he swallowed back tears after the game.

42-38, though! Impossible, unjust, insane. What the hell would he tell Dad? Better to just hope he didn't watch, let alone invite the same friends who'd dubbed him "The Basketball Guy" ever since he learned how to throw a ball into a wastepaper basket as a toddler. Those friends were in for a shock if so- or perhaps not a shock, given the third consecutive defeat. First match of the season? 60-32. A wipeout by all accounts which had dragged him out of the rose-tinted haze obscuring his view of new life in college. Second match of the season: 70-60. A more respectable loss, but none the less embarrassing, given his best shot was disqualified. And now this.

And now this.

The siren grew louder for some reason, but he kept driving, his engine kept wheezing and the radiator kept clunking. Damn thing couldn't heat porridge, let alone his truck.

Police often zoomed about this time of night. They must love speeding in the name of the law, laughing at time itself. Speaking of which, his clock read 20:50. Shit. For the love of God, what would it take for Gabriella to forgive him this time? A special dinner, perhaps? He hadn't had time to buy food, and he had once tried cooking sea bass for her, only to discover that he couldn't cook to save his life. Yet margherita pizza wouldn't suffice tonight.

Well... he'd think of something when he arrived.

Sighing, he swerved onto Willow Road, hoping the siren, whose discordant wails now made his ears ring, would die down. Shooting pains rippled up and down his legs when he shifted. Eminem now blared through the radio, the rapper's nasal, harsh delivery articulating every repressed spark of frustration inside his body.

"I pray to God for answers\_

\_Maybe I'll ask nicer..."\_

A police car materialized from the gloom, filling his rearview mirror. Was it tailing him? No, surely there must be some mistake. Just as he turned round to clarify this fact-

-CLASH.

Jesus Christ! Thrown back against the seat, he panted and then felt his head for injury. Nothing. What on earth-? Some idiot had left two garbage cans on the fricking road and both of them had spilled black bin bags everywhere.

"Please God," he whispered, a trickle of sweat running down his nose and into his mouth. Sweat seeped in between his clenched fingers, sticking them together; sweat trickled down the back of his neck and under his cotton polo.

A car door slammed and moments later, an officer appeared, tapping on the passenger seat window.

This wasn't happening.

But he opened it, just in case fiction was reality. "C-Can I help you, Sir?"

"Get outta the truck."

Even from the driver seat, Troy smelt the officer's breath mints and he recoiled. Still, what choice did he have? Unstrapping his seatbelt, he obeyed, crossing round the spilled garbage cans to the sidewalk.

"Officer, I can explain-"

The cop thrust his chest forward like a peacock, hands on hips. "Doing 75 on the freeway? Turning a corner without indicating? Smashing into garbage cans? Hell, you better have a good explanation!"

75 on the freeway? Surely not?

"Don't play confused- we've been tracking you for miles, careening like a drunkard."

"I haven't been drinking!" he stammered. Hell, the stiffest drink he'd ever swallowed was orange juice! "Please- my girlfriend, I'm late..."

"Licence and registration."

Sighing, Troy retrieved both from his truck. He'd promised to meet Gabriella at seven-thirty: it was now five past nine. The officer, a swarthy man with an impeccable Afro, who now took far longer than necessary to examine his licence, thought he'd been drink-driving. Just like Gabriella. He never got by a single day without some attack of irony. Jesus, she would blow a fuse- no, worse. What was worse than blowing a fuse when your useless boyfriend showed up almost two hours late on your birthday because he was upset about losing

yet another game, got caught speeding and was landed with an-

"-\$82 ticket." The officer finished scribbling something into a pad. Under the street lamp, his badge said Officer E Weakwater. "Signed, sealed, delivered-it's yours."

"What?"

"Don't try pretend you can't afford it, buddy. I know your type."

If the Officer thought his disbelief was instead feigned innocence, perhaps he wasn't as strong an actor as he thought. This despite spending hours onstage reading laughable minor parts in plays for the last two months. Yes, he could indeed afford the ticket with the money he'd withdrawn for whatever it cost to keep Gabriella happy tonight... and their next date if he still had a girlfriend come sunrise.

Unless he lied... No, that could land him behind bars. Then again, they had beds in prison- and food, too. He had skipped lunch and dinner, his occasional shaking and dizziness a constant reminder of this.

"What you daydreaming about?"

"I-"

"Do you mind if I search your truck?" Officer Weakwater said, handing him back his licence, registration and a slip of paper.

Before Troy could say, "Don't you need a warrant?" (Boy, could Gabriella's lectures come in handy!), the officer yanked open the passenger seat. Oh no-the cordial! Why did it have to look too much like wine under hot orange street lamps?

"That's not alcohol! It's for my girlfriend's birthday!"

"I'll be the judge of that." His smile looked quite sinister as he marched back to his car and returned with...

...a breathalyzer.

Troy relaxed. On such a horrible night, passing a breathalyzer test with flying colours would be his crowning glory. The world might laugh at him for this atrocious stunt, but at least he would go down in history as a non-alcoholic. Weakwater's smile melted into a grimace of disappointment as the results came back as negative- so negative, he made a great show of checking twice.

"You still gotta ticket to pay, buddy. And I'm adding \$35 for traffic school class- no, don't argue with me, or it'll be more. Plus this truck is a cut and dried disgrace. You got insurance?"

His victory now tasting like ash, Troy retrieved crumpled insurance papers from his bag, which Officer Weakwater again studied for too long before chucking it onto the bonnet.

"That'll be \$117." He scribbled something else in a pad, tore off several sheets and thrust them at him, before mumbling something into his walkie-talkie.

Fleetwood Mac's The Chain was playing in the truck. Damn radio. What could he kick with minimum chance of getting arrested? Those garbage cans, perhaps. Or he could pound his fists into the bonnet, creating a big enough hole to swallow him. Yes, that seemed convenient enough, and he would sleep until he awoke to discover the whole thing had, just like in crap movies, all been just a dream.

"Pick up the garbage cans, then you're free to go," Weakwater said, his voice losing its edge of amateur bravado. "That's one point on your licence."

He handed back the cordial.

By the time the officer drove away, by the time the garbage cans were lifted and all their bags returned and he finally reached Stanford at a legal speed, it was quarter to ten. Barely registering his movements, he stumbled towards the dorms, twice getting lost, and pulled his phone from his pocket. Sometimes, Gabriella forgot their dates until the last minute. Please let her forget this one, so that he didn't need to explain himself under oath as usual.

\_Beep beep.\_

\_Beep beep.\_

Please God, let her pick up. He shifted from leg to leg in a vain attempt to find reprieve from the dull aches and cramps that seized his body. Stanford University, a huddle of looming dark shapes, light only by the odd window, stared at him in disapproval, knowing he was an unwanted stranger. Indeed, he often received funny looks from students who saw his lack of a university lanyard and silently wondered how he got past security.

He shivered, having forgotten his coat.

\_Beep beep.\_

\_Beep beep.\_

Gabriella picked up on the twelfth ring and his stomach knots tightened to the point where his breath came in uneven gasps.

"Hello?" Her voice seemed amplified for some strange reason, until he recognized California Love blaring in the background. And were people- a whole city of them, from the sounds of things- shouting? Yes, although that probably counted as rapping. Then something crashed and several people laughed.

"Hey- Gabriella? It's me."

"Uh huh?" More laughter and crashes. She had forgotten their date, but somehow this knowledge brought a cold pang of disappointment to his stomach rather than relief.

"I'm outside."

"Outside where?"

Why didn't she know where? The noise grew, making it difficult to respond until California Love ended to a chorus of exaggerated cheers.

"Your dorm."

"What are you doing outside my dorm?" Her voice was louder. Someone in the background shouted her name, and she giggled. "Do you realize it's after ten? You're so crazy, Wildcat."

For a moment, Troy stood frozen, unable to speak.

"Y-Your birthday...?"

"Yeah, I'm in LA."

LA? \_

His knees felt weak. "I- I just drove all the way here to-"

"Look, that's sweet of you, but you should have checked first to see whether I was going to be on campus, right?"

"R-Right. Of course. My mistake."

"Sasha threw a \$300 surprise party for me, so I can't exactly walk out just to meet you."

"Sure." He couldn't hear his own voice. The air had just gotten colder.

"I need to go, Wildcat." Another crash and more laughter. "Talk later."

"Happy Birth-"

\_Click.\_ The phone line went dead.

He didn't remember what happened after that, but sometime before eleven, he returned to Berkeley, stumbled from his truck and limped back to his dorm carrying his bag, the cake, roses, the birthday card, phone, licence, registration and tickets. All were dumped in a pile on the floor and without undressing or showering, he crashed facedown into bed, every ache and pain magnified tenfold.

When he raised his head an inch, the bedside alarm read midnight. His laptop, sitting on his desk, still had bubbles dancing over its screen. Clambering out of bed, he sat down and pressed Enter. Christ, he hadn't logged off Facebook, around 30 notifications glaring at him.

Sighing, he logged out.

A drink- he needed a drink and that blackcurrant cordial tasted like cough syrup. His dorm-mate, Josh Li, owed him orange juice after "accidentally" drinking the rest of his last week. Time to try his luck.

He limped into the shared kitchen. The light was still on, and to his dismay, Josh was sitting on the table reading Scientific American.

"Oh hey, man!" Josh, who wore a look of permanent surprise, always greeted people as though they'd appeared from thin air. "Didn't see you come in. Bad luck about the game. That Stevenson's a bastard!"

Despite the callous behaviour of his opponent, Troy only pursed his lips and shrugged. "Win together, lose together."

"Clear foul, man. Should've been turfed out. Do you think the ref was being bribed? I've read about that in Scientific American. It's all a matter of probability and statistics, not to mention a splash of good ol' behavioural science. Spot anything suspicious?"

He rubbed his head in a feeble attempt to stave off a worsening headache. Was there a fast-forward button for this conversation, allowing him to get his juice in peace? And maybe a bagel. His stomach growled and clenched. The kitchen smelt like roast potatoes and something bitter. Parsley, perhaps. But he just didn't have enough energy or concentration to cook anything, let alone the skill. A bagel would have to suffice.

"Dude, that's not how it went down."

"Ah, sure. I suppose we'll find out in twenty years. That's how long the average criminal investigation into cheating takes- I've read about it somewhere."

"Uh huh."

"Anyway, how'd the girlfriend's party go?"

Troy made a beeline for the fridge so that his back was to Josh before replying. "Great. It, uh, went great."

"You get pissed?"

He pretended to laugh. "Sure, yeah."

"Where'd you take her?" Josh said, throwing down the journal and leaning forward. "Girls love big nights."

"Uh, LA."

Josh's eyes widened and he whistled. "Sweet! City of Angels- wow, she must be putty in your hands, man!"

"S-Sure." The kitchen floor was swimming before his eyes. "Anyway, I'm beat, so-"

"Sure, man."

He rushed back to his room with juice, glass, plate, and shut the door.

Silence. That's all he heard these days. Two months after beginning college, believing his future knew no bounds, he found himself stuck in this cell passing as a bedroom, still crammed with two packing boxes of useless shit. He kicked one and ripples of pain shot up his leg.

On second thoughts... Setting his drink and bagel on the desk, he sat down and rifled through one box.

Yeah, useless shit: a pair of lucky socks, a picture of the scoreboard from Senior Year when the Wildcats won back-to-back championships... Damn. How hollow that victory tasted compared to tonight's disaster- this April gone by was a century ago in someone else's life. Now it was October, the month of golden leaves and sunsets with just a hint of approaching winter. Speaking of winter, he pulled out a photo of himself dressed as Arnold in Twinkle Towne. Another lifetime away. He stared at it for a few moments without blinking.

"Who am I?" he murmured. "Was that really me?"

Theatre at Berkeley had thrust him from the spotlight to oblivion. He hadn't intended it, confident enough in his skills onstage since graduating. And then he met his new fellow students, people who had memorized Shakespeare's soliloquies, won prestigious prizes, had their names in local papers, trained in classical singing or studied dance since childhood. Everything he achieved in East High paled into laughable insignificance. Who was he? Some kid who thought he might dabble in the Performing Arts as a break from basketball and got lucky in two musicals plus a Talent Show (almost losing all his friends in the process), bystanding far more talented candidates each time, who could carry a decent tune, but couldn't stand Shakespeare, hadn't won a scholarship to Juilliard and relied on stellar composition and choreography to be worth watching.

Thus he kept his head down, read as much as possible, still hated Shakespeare and enjoyed his anonymity.

Had he sought anonymity on the Basketball Team, he might not have contributed to today's defeat.

More useless items slipped through his fingers. A broken watch, his Wildcat jersey, the videotape for Metropolis which he carried everywhere, several crumpled sheets of manuscript paper...

About to drop those too, he unfurled one. Fading notes in pencil danced across every line with neatly written lyrics wedged in between. Spreading the sheet out further, he traced a finger over each word, the faint and familiar melody soothing his headache.

"And I've never had someone as good for me as you

No one like you

So lonely before, I finally found

What I've been looking for."

Tonight, everything had happened in the reverse. His fault, of course. Nobody forced him to mope in the changing-rooms for an hour after the game, replaying every error, missed opportunity and foul, searching for a different outcome. By the time his phone reminded him of Gabriella's birthday, he was already too late. Of course her friends weren't so incompetent; perhaps if he had a spare \$300 like Sasha, he could have taken Gabriella to LA instead. Obviously, she was enjoying herself. Why hadn't he saved up for a romantic trip? Or even shown up on time- he couldn't even show up on time!

And that fucking ticket.... He sniffed and turned over the manuscript. There was a short note at the back:

"Dear Troy- here's your copy like you asked. I'm so glad you like this song; I felt so proud of myself when I finished it. Thank you for taking an interest in my music and thank you for being so kind to me. Love, Kelsi."

In spite of such a terrible day, he smiled- a ghost of a smile, but there all the same. Funnily enough, despite poring over this song whilst rehearsing "Breaking Free", he didn't remember her note.

The Winter Musicale... He'd had so much fun- not just from deliberately earning himself detention for more free time onstage, not just from that thrill that accompanied watching the stage come alive with lights and costumes and the school orchestra... Not even guiding Gabriella through "Breaking Free" during the callbacks, which left the entire school on their feet, cheering- blatantly disproving any fear that he'd be the laughing stock of the century.

No, his favourite moment was one particular practice with Kelsi Nielsen. Having shown him how to rehearse, having dispelled his fears and played the melody for "Breaking Free", he just sang the first line and... That was it. He sang whilst flying around the room, somehow not crashing into tubas and cellos, somehow not annoying Kelsi, who suddenly transformed from shrinking violet to eagerly improvising, all smiles.

Kelsi won a scholarship to Juilliard- no surprises there. Despite their friendship, they hadn't spoken since graduation, sucked away by the allure of college life. What had he said to her on graduation? After a moment's thought, he gave up. Sad, really. She might not even remember him. Of course not; he wasn't even remotely as interesting as New York or Juilliard. Besides, she, just like his other friends (who rarely ever called now), wouldn't want to hear about his failures today. Just like his other friends, she must be having a ball. Everyone had let East High's Primo Boy go. Much as he hated the moniker, why did the thought hurt so much?

And why did he long for a conversation that lasted longer than a minute? Too bad he and Kelsi never exchanged numbers or followed each other on social media. Such was their friendship- based onstage. When offstage, he remained as much of a Wildcat as ever. No, he was unlikely to get hold of her again.

Then he glanced at his laptop, still in sleep mode.

Unless...

Perhaps the night wasn't a waste after all.

## 2. Chapter II: Reconnection

\*\*CHAPTER II: RECONNECTION\*\*

\* \* \*

"Great work, everyone!"

Professor Harrison stood under the auditorium lights, bathed in a heavenly glow and waving his arms like a conductor.

With a silent groan, Troy sat up straighter, dropping his copy of *\_Twelfth Night* on the floor. Every other student gazed up at the Professor, all smiles, nods and whispers of satisfaction. Why so happy? Having slogged through a morass of unpronounceable words, attempting to convey what Harrison called "*\_Elizabethan glory*"\_, he was tongue-tied and in need of a rest.

"Excellent work, Hamilton," he said, once again referring to his students by surname. "Remember, Olivia is impulsive, eager."

Laura Hamilton, who seemed to live in the Theatre, nodded, her red curls bouncing. "Yes, Professor. Absolutely right, Professor."

"Johnson, I'm promoting you from Aguecheek to Belch. James, you are Aguecheek."

Both nodded, beaming at this high honour.

"Bolton, you made a persuasive Gardener. Keep up the good work."

He tried to smile in response, but sank lower in his chair. Any persuasiveness in his acting came from constantly watching the clock and willing the two-hour lesson to end, end, end *\_now*. *\_By* the time it did, Eric Johnson had nudged him and nodded towards his script. Fortunately, everyone else was too busy to notice this lapse.

The bell rang.

"Write a monologue expressing longing for next week!" Professor Harrison said over the sound of shoes clunking across the stage. "Better not scrimp on emotion if you want to pass!"

*\_Fan\_-tastic.* Hauling himself to his feet, he stuffed Twelfth Night into his bag and slouched out of the auditorium. Next stop, the library. He could while away two hours on this monologue and Algebra, then attend his traffic school class, and then...

The weekend.

It couldn't have come any faster. A week had passed by since the disaster on Gabriella's birthday. A week of essays, gym practice, Twelfth Night, Algebra and microwaved meals whenever he had a spare minute. He found Kelsi on Facebook last week and sent a friend request, but so far she hadn't responded. This wasn't surprising; he hardly had time for social media, either. Sure, he snuck in the odd session then and again, keeping track of life on the web, though not saying much. What could he tell anyone? Nothing so spectacular, unlike Chad, who posted pictures of himself clutching basketballs with a smug grin at least once a week. Unlike Zeke, perpetually covered in icing and edible flowers; unlike Jason, perpetually covered in primer and egg tempera. Some community college in Wisconsin had accepted him, apparently.

Traffic school class was an insult to his intelligence, but in amongst a sea of moody drivers, many of whom needed a shave, and a pencil thin teacher who smiled too much, he withstood it all with dignity. With a little luck, his father would never hear about this. Nor Gabriella.

Saturday came at last, burnished copper sunlight streaming through his windows. It marked a week and a day since he had last spoken with Gabriella.

The usual rhythm of their relationship these days involved infrequent phonecalls, dates and disjointed conversations. The rest of the time he spent with pictures of her, willing himself back to simple times when he drove over to hers whenever he pleased, and they spent an evening together over pizza and chocolate-covered strawberries. Times when they lounged in her hammock, rehearsing songs or chatting about future plans or doing homework. And though she often instructed him on how to do his homework (fair enough, given her straight A's), at least they spent time *\_together\_*. Compared to now, he would give anything even to hear her scold him again. Better than staring at ancient photographs, longing for a glimpse of her dark curls and intelligent smile.

Sometimes, he reached out and touched...

...Nothing.

And then he picked up the phone, hoping she'd answer, only to hear voicemail.

But such struggles formed part of any love. Despite the sinking feeling in his stomach that sometimes grew into a heavy, dull throb, he still believed. When he remembered graduation, declaring his love for Gabriella to a joyous high school, seeing Mrs Montez's eyes fill with tears as she hugged him and told him to make Gabriella happy, it was worth it.

Certainly.

One day, both their schedules would clear up- perhaps around Thanksgiving- and everything would return to normal. So even though he had believed that normal would be on her birthday, his chance to revive their relationship... Well, that failure must lead to an even greater success.

He spent most Saturdays in his dorm. Consequently, after two months in college, he hadn't made any friends, especially not from amongst the girls who batted their eyelids at him and giggled at his every word. Well, perhaps Josh Li was his friend, but cheerful as the Chemistry nerd might be, Troy sensed he wasn't as important as Josh's other friends, or chess, or a girl named Magdala- a girl whom Josh had never met personally.

All in all, when he logged into Facebook this Saturday morning and found nothing new from Kelsi, a swell of disappointment rose within him. Instead, Gabriella had updated her status, sharing a picture of the LA skyline with Sasha Marcus. Of course. As if he needed another reminder of his own uselessness.

He minimized the window and pulled out his copy of The Double by Dostoyevsky. Having taken a Russian history class for extra credit, the reading list had kept him sane all week. It was one of many surprising discoveries during the last months: he enjoyed reading... and Math. How the latter had happened was a Divine mystery, since he spent most Math lessons at East High playing hangman with Chad. It must be Gabriella's influence. And as for Dostoyevsky? Maybe the great author's intricate portraits of human beings gave him hope that, no matter his own failings, someone else always suffered more than him. Was that truly comforting? Well, he could pretend, the only thing he did these days. Pretend to be well, pretend to have a social life, pretend that college offered everything he expected.

People could get so used to lying that they believed their own deceit. When he reached that stage, God help him.

Until then, a lie a day kept enquiries away.

Just as Golyadkin visited Dr Rutenspitz, his phone rang. Dad. And there'd be no other topic of conversation than-

"-Bad luck about the game, son. That was rough."

"Thanks, Dad."

"But you gotta keep your eye on the prize. Sure, you got some knocks, but let 'em motivate you to work harder. You in the gym right now?"

He swallowed. "Actually, I'm, uh, reading..."

"Read after you've won a game, son. Come on- get out onto the court and shoot some hoops! Work on those free throws- I liked your shot against the Longhorns, but you panicked."

"I know, Dad."

"You gotta stay cool, stay focused. Ball's is your only friend. Act as

though there's no one else on the Court. Stevenson threw you off balance. Push those negative emotions to the corner."

"Yes, Dad."

With his father's enthusiasm, why couldn't he play the next match? Instead, he was no doubt guiding the new Wildcat roster to another Championship victory. He thought of Jimmie "Rocket Man" Zara, the player who truly deserved the glory for scoring the winning basket in April. How was he doing now? Better than him, or discovering the difficulty of leading a team, let alone charging to victory?

Whilst he considered these matters, his father's voice filled his ears, deep in an inspiring sermon. He longed to hear his mother for a moment, a break from sport. Funny, since he had always begged her for one more minute playing or talking basketball at home, before she dragged him back to reality. How times had changed.

"-and you'll get that prize, I promise ya."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Anyway, how's it going down there?"

"Great."

"You and Gabriella fine?"

"Better every day. W-Went to LA for her birthday."

"Swell!" His father chuckled. "Don't leave anything to chance, do ya? Me and your mother got by on long walks and café's. Did the trick alright."

Evidently his father didn't know Gabriella well enough.

"And how's the Theatre stuff going? They getting you to tear up the stage yet?"

He pretended to laugh. "Oh no, not yet. Shakespeare essays right now."

"Damn, could never understand all that high-falutin' stuff. Don't know how I passed. Good luck with it, though."

He relaxed. "Thanks, Dad."

"No problem."

"How's mom?"

"Doin' great. She's out shopping. Charlie and Martha are coming over for dinner with their nephews. You should see the kids- always tearing around the place! One's already into golf. You still play?"

"Um, don't have much time for it."

In fact, he hadn't played since leaving Lava Springs, so weary of his friends' hostility last summer. Neither had he seen Chad's boisterous cousins since New Year's. This was no loss: Zachary and Damon always threw their sticky toys at him and stole stuff from his room.

"Well, pick up a club again some day. You could teach them! But first, win a game. I got your back son, but the ball's in your Court now."

"Sure. Thanks, Dad- I appreciate it." He bit his tongue. "Say hi to mom for me."

The call ended: he dropped his phone and returned to the comfort of Dostoyevsky. Running drills now when he had only just gotten over the aches and pains of last Friday was entirely out of the question. Though he loved the

October sun, that hovered between warmth and a fresh chill, he simply hadn't the energy or courage to face the outside world.

In The Double, Mr Golyadkin was rambling to the doctor.

His phone rang. Gabriella.

Fighting back panic, he grabbed it and accepted the call.

"Hey! I haven't heard from you in a while..."

"Been so busy- Constitutional Law is a complete snooze. Freaking out over this James Madison essay right now."

"You'll do great."

She huffed. "Please don't say that; it makes me even more nervous."

"Sorry." He always said the wrong thing. Might as well tape his big flapper shut.

A silence followed, not uncommon during their phone calls.

"So... your birthday... You enjoy the party?"

"Oh yeah!" she said, her voice filled with childlike enthusiasm.

And for the next fifteen minutes, she discussed the party: the venue (Sasha's parents' house), the drinks, her presents...

Tuning out after additional praise of the birthday cake, Troy maximized his Facebook window to get a look at Sasha's profile, any hopes of her mentioning his absence and her consequent regret crushed.

Before he could search her name, a new notification cropped up.

"Kelsi Willow Nielsen has accepted your friend request."

Finally! He smiled for the first time in God knew when. So whilst Gabriella discussed the hors d'oeuvres (roast turkey wrapped in salmon and sesame seeds) he clicked on Kelsi's profile and left a message.

"Hey Kels!"

Not getting a response for a couple of minutes, he tuned back into Gabriella's conversation.

"-totally have to get the cook's name. My mom would love her."

"Sounds great. Listen, Gab, I need to-"

"-So, are you coming down here or not, Wildcat? I want to go see Le Rayon Vert!- got tickets off Sandy."

He didn't immediately reply, because another notification appeared from Kelsi. He opened it with a strange excitement.

Kelsi had posted a cartoon of a penguin rushing over to hug another penguin on his wall, writing "HI!" underneath, accompanied by endless exclamation marks. The warmth within him outstripped that of the sun outside. It reminded him of bleary Monday mornings during home-room when he wanted to sleep on his desk, interrupted when Kelsi would lean over and poke his arm with her pencil, giggling. Or those days when Ms Darbus was droning on about Christopher Marlowe, and they'd pull bored faces at each other. Or those days when he felt down, and only she would notice, bringing him back to the present with a hug and warm smile.

Like now.

"Troy? You even listening?"

\_Shit. \_"Sorry- I-"

Why did he always screw up? Ignoring a new notification (responding to his original post), he struggled to compose himself.

"I'm still beat from the game last week."

And yet all exhaustion and pain nurtured for days on end vanished at the thought of someone, albeit thousands of miles away, who was delighted to hear from him.

"Well, I've been in the library swallowing tomes on 19th century Tort Law- I'd give anything to bounce a ball for two hours!"

Swallowing back a sigh, he nodded, though she couldn't see. "Sure. I understand."

"Right- so see you in an hour?"

Another notification from Kelsi appeared. His heart sank. But no- he could not screw up with Gabriella another time. Not after last week's debacle. Everything else could wait.

"Be there before you know it."

"Bye," she said, and hung up.

When he arrived at Stanford, Gabriella was outside the grounds, tapping away on her phone. She wore a royal navy dress, lustrous hair falling loose over her shoulders. He kissed her, savouring the taste of her lips against his own. How he had missed this! After a moment, she pulled away, but allowed their lips to brush once. The rest of the time, she continued discussing her birthday party whilst he navigated his way through downtown traffic.

"Well, you know, I wasn't at your party..."

"Oh- Sasha booked it two weeks ago."

Then she launched back into her conversation about every single dinner course, and he lost hope altogether.

Le Rayon Vert was incredibly dull- having hated French lessons, he could barely follow anything and barely had patience for the subtitles. Délphine seemed to him incredibly ungrateful- with her money, she could afford a holiday anyplace she wanted. But when she explained her longing to find the Green Ray, he was reminded of Professor Harrison's assignment. Pulling out a scrap of paper and pencil from his pocket, he scribbled some things down until Gabriella nudged and shushed him into silence.

Dinner was shrimp linguini followed by lemon meringue- an unwise expense, given his recent ticket, but worth it when Gabriella gasped in delight, declaring every dish to be perfect. They discussed food for a while, and even though he knew nothing about cooking, pretending to like all her favourites, the tension in his stomach lessened. Halfway through, he leaned over to kiss her, and she responded in kind.

See? They were making this work.

He remained in this complacent state of mind whilst driving Gabriella back to her dorm until a familiar sputter drew his attention.

"Oh no," he muttered- but the engine coughed, sneezed and then spat repeatedly. "Shit."

Gabriella, discussing an upcoming girls' weekend, turned to him in disbelief as he swerved to the sidewalk. His engine shuddered and then stopped altogether.

"You cannot be serious."

"I- I don't understand-" he said, trying not to chuck the ignition key outside.

"Do you think now would be the time to get a proper car, sweetheart?"

"This is a proper- Look, I'm so sorry, I'll..."

"Nice job: a cop's coming. We're going to get arrested, and I've got a ton of studying to do this evening. Congratulations, Wildcat."

Stunned, Troy stared at her, unable to respond. She shook her head and turned away.

Once again an officer, this time a woman, tapped on the window. After Troy opened it, she leaned inside, filling the truck with the scent of jasmine.

"Some swerve, honey. You think this is a NASCAR circuit? The hell's going on here?"

Gabriella gestured at him, eyes fixed on the road ahead. Every other vehicle drove just fine.

"Engine died."

"Yeah, heard that monster check out from a foot away. Hang on, I'll call someone to tow your vehicle."

"Thanks, Ma'am."

As she pulled out her walkie-talkie, she said, "I hope you're getting a new truck- I've seen cars at the bottom of rivers in better shape than this wreck."

Filled with shame, he forced a smile and nodded. So his truck wasn't NASCAR material, so it failed him whenever it pleased, so he never had the time or money to fix it up like he wanted... It was still his truck. It represented freedom, not just from unreliable buses, but the freedom to explore, to be alone with miles of road stretching ahead, the thrum of a well-tuned engine (not that he had one) and a summer breeze. As a child, he'd watch spellbound as big men on TV fixed up wrecks and took them on road adventures, hoping to one day become one of them. Not that this sorry episode was worth watching, but he could still dream.

The officer returned, her sympathy replaced by a frown. She held a notepad, and was chewing a pen.

"You're Troy Bolton, right?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"You got pulled over last week for doing 75 in a 60."

Gabriella muttered, "Jesus Christ," still refusing to look at him.

"Er... yes."

"I can't believe this thing is insured.. Suicide auto insurance, if you ask me. Sir, I'm gonna mandate you get this vehicle serviced, or I'll impound it."

Troy opened his mouth to protest, but no sound came out. Meanwhile, she walked round to the bonnet and lifted it, releasing a cloud of smoke.

Gabriella pulled out her phone and left a voicemail for Sandy, speaking far louder than necessary.

The officer slammed down the bonnet and returned to the window, her frown even

darker.

"Sir, if you think duct tape is in any way appropriate for servicing a fuel pump, you're outta your mind."

"I was going to-"

"I'm declaring this vehicle unfit to drive." She scribbled some things down. "Get these essential repairs done and present proof they're done, or this baby's days on the road are history. You're endangering yourself and others, not to mention flipping the bird at traffic law."

With numb hands, he took the repairs list. Engine servicing, a new fuel pump and exhaust pipe, fresh paint and wash. Total of \$3000, conservative estimate. His credit card had a \$2000 limit, a quarter of it spent on fuel, dates and other basic living expenses. He never liked to use it much, but that might change now. As for savings, he had almost enough- finally- for the fuel pump, but not anything else. So what about getting back for the Thanksgiving holiday- or Christmas?

"Shit," he whispered.

"Tow truck's here," the officer said, apparently not hearing this. "Have a good day, sweetie."

Gabriella asked the tow truck driver something, and then jumped out a couple of miles later without saying goodbye. And when they arrived at the garage, Troy humming in disinterested acknowledgement of the truck driver's friendly banter, he paid \$125, rented a storage space and accepted an offer of a lift from the general manager who was headed near Berkeley.

An hour later, he stumbled back into his dorm, speechless.

Josh Li was in his room playing Aerosmith too loudly as usual. This concealed the sound of various experiments he did there with stolen scraps of metal and hydrochloric acid- or so said urban legend.

Sinking into his desk chair, he stared up at the ceiling, watching a spider scuttle around. He'd always loved spiders as a kid, particularly the monsters that lived in his treehouse. He used to scoop them into jars and store them on his bedroom windowsill, only to sigh in disappointment when they died. His mother's attempts to ban him from bringing them and other bugs into the house repeatedly failed. Sometimes she threatened never to enter his room, but always managed to clear out the jars, complete with their dead contents, much to his dismay. How on earth she did it, he would never know, but then his mother always had a tough streak.

If only she was here!

If only.

The sky darkened, stars brightened. Aerosmith ended with its usual cacophony and he heard Josh scrabble around for something. Probably changing song. Soon enough, the mournful chords of Linkin Park began, drowning out what sounded like a deflating balloon.

Not another one of his helium gas tricks! They weren't interesting or funny, as he seemed to think.

Sighing, he stood up, traipsed into the kitchen, pulled a lasagne from the fridge and stuck it in the microwave. When it was ready, he returned to his room and cleared a space on his desk. His laptop was still sleeping, but on the verge of death. He stuck in the charger and his Facebook window popped up again, showing his profile page and...

"Kelsi," he said simply.

In all the debacle, he had completely forgotten her, but her message remained: a cartoon penguin rushing over to hug another penguin. He stared at it for

longer than necessary, a small smile at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a big deal. Just a cartoon. Not as though he craved a real hug like air to breathe, or felt a lump rising in his throat... Not as though he felt profound gratitude to her for remembering him, for still considering him important enough to make this gesture, which, after an awful day, soothed him like nothing else.

Clicking on the notifications tab, he found her messages. She probably assumed after a couple of hours that he wouldn't bother to reply. Given how much he had disappointed everyone, this couldn't hurt. But when he clicked on the first message, a response to his post, his bittersweet smile grew wider.

"\_Hey! :) Sorry I didn't see your request, was in Toronto for a week studying orchestra! So cool, see pics on my page! :) Missed you, how are you doing?"\_

Focusing on the words, "\_Missed you"\_, he could almost hear her real voice, gushing about music, her beloved "\_ideas"\_(in which everybody must take part), her arranging everyone's schedule so they could rehearse... Clicking her profile, he scrolled through pictures of her everywhere except the kitchen sink. Toronto looked beautiful, and she smiled in front of every building she could find. He liked and commented on a picture of her in front of a baby grand, holding a stash of manuscripts and wearing a bandana.

A new notification popped up a few minutes later. She replied in smiley emoticons, mere electronic symbols that filled him with warmth. And then another message appeared.

"\_Hey Troy- you wanna call me? PM'd you my number earlier."\_

His next actions were a blur- finding her number, dialling it and waiting for her to pick up. Only two rings passed before she did.

"Troy!" Her voice was warm, excited, as though they were speaking for the first time.

"Hello, Kelsi," he said, leaning back in his chair. "You know you shouldn't share personal info on social media."

"Hey, as long as you're not a serial killer or worse, a \_telesales\_ person, I'll be fine."

And as he laughed, his spirits rose into the night sky like one of Josh's helium balloons.

### 3. Chapter III: The Cost of Happiness

#### \*\*CHAPTER III: THE COST OF HAPPINESS\*\*

\* \* \*

Early on Sunday, however, Troy's spirits crashed back down to earth.

"Hey Gabriella... It's me. Listen, I screwed up. I'm so sorry about yesterday- totally my fault. Sorry."

He chewed his lip. Where was his famous romantic eloquence when needed? Right from the moment they met, Gabriella had always relented in the face of his apologies, well prepared because the omnipresent threat of losing her, failing and of being replaced often kept him awake at night. Of course, this was a necessary struggle to... Well, it was necessary to keep the flame alive. Funny phrase, that. One of those things everyone said which seemed exaggerated. Flames, sparks, fires of romance. He felt none of those. No, his relationship was a serious affair, requiring planning, preemption and painstaking preservation. All relationships must surely be the same.

But what on earth would he say now?

"...I can make it up to you- it's a surprise."

The surprise being that there was no surprise. Not yet.

"So call me? I, uh, I love you?" The words sounded strangled. "Bye."

Rain spattered against the window as he hung up and dropped his phone onto the table. A new message appeared, stating that he was out of credit. He ignored it. Time for a run instead; it would clear his head.

And so he ran around Berkeley, his Adidas sneakers splashing through grey puddles and stomping on tarmac. Rain pelted his face for three miles, its rhythm in sync with the throbbing inside his head. Sometimes he couldn't see, only hoping that he wouldn't crash into a streetlight or worse. Nobody was around, a fact that disturbed his concentration more often than not.

On and on he ran, as though fleeing something- but what? There was nothing to flee from, nothing to fear. California was his home now, with her swaying palm trees, cities of dreams and millions of undying lights. He would love it eventually; no famous state should have an acquired taste. True, he had visited LA in September and hated it at first sight, and true, he hoped that San Francisco would also offer little, but perhaps a while longer and the Ghost of California Future might soften his iron heart.

He avoided mentioning Albuquerque to himself or anyone else lest he remember East High and its rooftop greenhouse, where he'd wander around, lost in nature and thought. He might remember his bedroom, a treasure trove of collectables, or his treehouse where he once planned to build his own Apollo 9...

A bread truck whizzed past, raising a tidal wave of muddy water that drenched his jogging bottoms.

Back to reality.

With heavy clouds looming and the rain still lashing everything in sight, he returned to campus, tempted to collapse anywhere. Common sense dragged him back to his dorm, where Josh still hadn't awoken- a blessing since his "Dazed and Confused" alarm ringtone made the whole dorm shudder. The clock read 7:30. After a shower and some muesli, he tidied his desk somewhat and then turned to the packing boxes.

Ten minutes later, all he had done was rifle through them, think of a convenient place to hang this or that, shake his head and stuff this or that back inside.

Except Kelsi's songs; as it turned out, he had preserved every page, including those he never sang. He couldn't find a sensible place for them, but they ought to be visible. In the end, he compromised by placing them neatly on top of his other junk. Kelsi poured her heart and soul into every note, day after day. It was this dedication, as well as his own indifference, that prevented him from ever noticing her in the first place, her head always being buried in one score or another. Only when she tripped over onstage almost two years ago, littering her work everywhere did he first notice and draw a smile out of her. God, he had almost forgotten that day, buried under a mound of other high school memories.

Now that day, leading to his unexpected performance in Twinkle Towne, was a good day- and if he could snatch back time to Senior Year, he would have told Kelsi so.

For an hour after running, he immersed himself in Tsarist history. But in the middle of reading about Rasputin's arrival in Saint Petersburg, his mind wandered back to Kelsi.

What began as a jovial catch-up between them last night eventually sprawled over two hours. She babbled about anything and everything, apologizing every so often for doing so, only to pick up right where she left off. Indeed, she

taught him an entire curriculum on New York's grungy cityscapes, the rules against smoking in the dorms (which apparently three students broke Friday), the glory of Juilliard and her palatial music-rooms, extortionate cab fares and the omnipresent threat of being glued to the subway with chewing-gum.

Or so she said.

Whenever Kelsi burst into never-ending speeches back at East High, quite contrary to her shy nature, he (somehow the only one subjected to them) feared she might swallow her tongue. It was often essential to stop her midflow for safety. Last night, however, every mundane detail became fascinating, every exaggeration became fact. He listened to her voice, high-pitched when eager, low-pitched when casual. And he certainly said plenty himself- quite unusual, given the complete lack of sparkling excitement in his life.

So instead, he told her things that sounded sparkling and exciting. Yes, he loved college, learned a ton a day, made more friends than enemies. As Kelsi declared herself "delighted" by this news, he had cursed himself silently. Delighted. Even today, his stomach still clenched at the word.

Why did she have to say that? Why couldn't she just say "happy" instead?

Things grew worse when Kelsi asked after Gabriella- caught by surprise, he didn't immediately respond and his answer, after she repeated the question, was hurried, monosyllabic and incoherent to his ears. To Kelsi's ears, this was a sign of romance itself- the ubiquitous spark- and his heart sank even further.

"You're the luckiest guy alive," she had said, her voice suddenly soft. "I wish- well, I mean anyone would kill for a relationship like yours, wouldn't they?"

What choice did he have but to agree?

He stared out of the window, eyes exhausted from reading; every word in *The Romanovs* was melting into the other. Fairy tale romance. Yes, he and Gabriella had a fairy tale romance. Certainly. Right from the moment he met that shy, dark-haired girl who was pushed onto the karaoke stage only to reveal her incredible talent, he had believed- still believed- Gabriella was *The One*. Yes, fairy tale romance... provided he got his act together and kept Gabriella happy for one miserable day.

In that frame of mind, inspired by Kelsi and motivated to earn her continued approval, he had woken early this morning to call Gabriella and apologize. Hopefully, she would hear his voicemail and call.

And then what of his truck? More hours at the drugstore? He should ask this morning, but seeing no end to the furious rains, his heart decided against it.

Soon after arriving in Berkeley, he had spent at least a month finding decent work, finally landing a Sunday afternoon shift at the drugstore, about a half hour's drive away from his dorm, which took his mind off life. The pay was decent, the work simple: stocking shelves, taking inventory, processing sales, calling irritable suppliers to make more orders. He kept his head down and worked hard. As a result, the store manager, who constantly frowned, demonstrated his approval with a "pat" on the back, which felt more like a chokeslam. Female clientele increased, always making sure to ask after the locations of various products in spite of clear labels everywhere. Could be worse. At least they were polite, unlike the violent affections of Sharpay Evans, the primadonna who had latched onto him like a barnacle throughout high school.

It seemed no customer ever tired of either lemon-scented soap or constipation tablets, either.

Of course, more hours meant less time for practice- unthinkable for Coach Bolton's son- or study. Sure, it was the weekend, but given that he now possessed more books than friends- unthinkable for East High's Former Primo Boy- and given that he actually enjoyed polynomials and Dostoyevsky, Sundays

should have been spent in the library.

Well, that would happen soon enough, once he regained his credibility, his vehicle, and, most importantly, Gabriella's trust.

Besides, when he eventually found a suitable surprise that left Gabriella breathless (why the hell was his mind blank?), he would finally have something truthful to tell Kelsi.

She would be "delighted".

The resonant twang of Jimmy Page's guitar cut through his thoughts: Joshua Li Zhou had arisen. Suppressing a groan, he read the clock. 11:00. Where did time go? Closing his book, he wandered into the kitchen, his stomach growling.

Josh was already there, emptying the contents of a marmalade jar onto a stack of toast, and Led Zeppelin were still screaming in the background.

"Oh hey, man! Great day, isn't it?"

The rain hadn't stopped and the sky resembled dusk.

"Sure."

"I'm going for a bike ride after this. So close to breaking a record- and I'll get to see Magdala on the way, too!"

Politeness prevented Troy from enquiring further.

"By the way, I didn't know you could talk so much."

In the middle of adding tomatoes to his tuna salad, he paused. "What?"

"Last night. Smuggling weed in music scores? Who were you talking to?"

Speechless, he blinked before remembering to answer. "J-Just an anecdote that I heard."

"That's clever. Although I could probably make the stuff in my lab. I don't mind a bit of weed now and again."

Josh crammed another wedge of toast into his mouth, leaving him to the comfort of slicing tomatoes and celery. But he was smiling. Kelsi had a great sense of humour, something he had long forgotten. With surprising sharpness, she could spot the absurd and the obnoxious a mile away. Yes, according to her, the three students who smoked in their dorms preferred dead grass to tobacco, as she put it. How she discovered this, he had no idea, and was too busy laughing to ask.

Adding basil and sweet corn to his salad, he was just about to leave when Josh made a strangled noise.

"Yeah, what?"

"I left my Aldehyde paper at Loui's apartment. Can I borrow your truck?"

"It's uh.... In the garage. Servicing. Um... I'm walking everywhere right now."

Walking: an honest alternative that only just occurred to him. Damn it, why had his pathetic engine given up yesterday?

"Dammit!" Josh said, as though in tune with his thoughts. "Loui's got hamsters; I don't trust the bastard."

"Bike ride?"

"- I mean, she practically worships those bloated rats, and I just-"

"You could use your bike?"

"Oh. Oh yeah."

Troy turned towards the door, and then hesitated. "Loui's a she?"

Josh grimaced. "Yep. Louise Feldman. Called herself Loui as a toddler, name stuck ever since. Spends her time breeding hamsters and writing awful songs about California."

"She writes songs? Hey, my friend in New York- the one I spoke to last night- she-"

"-You spent more time laughing like a crazy person, dude."

He ignored that comment. "She's a composer."

"God, I feel sorry for you. Composers are miserable bastards and their work is overrated because people feel sorry for them. I mean, get a life already!"

"No, no, she's amazing- you should hear her songs. She won a scholarship to Juilliard." He paused. "And she's not a bastard, much less a miserable one."

In the middle of devouring more toast- would he even have any teeth left?-  
Josh raised an eyebrow.

"Sounds legit."

What was legit? Her being at Juilliard or not being a bastard? However, his hunger now overcame any interest in their conversation and after making excuses, he retreated to his room.

And stared at his phone.

Without thinking, he dumped his lunch on the table, added credit and was just about to dial her number when another call interrupted.

Gabriella. Dammit!

No- he could not be ungrateful. Not on this golden opportunity to fix things once and for all. Hadn't he longed for her to pick up all day, glancing at his phone every so often? His feelings could not change so drastically in a matter of hours. No wonder Gabriella considered him incompetent; he could not make his mind up on anything. How selfish to be irritated by a call from his girlfriend!

With trembling fingers, he accepted it.

For once, she spoke first. "So, Wildcat, what's this surprise?"

Christ, did he say that? For several seconds, he stood frozen, mouth open but silent. Surprise. The surprise was... Shit, the surprise was...

And then it came to him.

"San Fran- whole weekend. You and me. What do you think?"

Gabriella sighed. "Honey, you do know it's Sunday, right? Weekend's over."

"Yeah! Sure. Right." He forced a chuckle. "Next weekend."

"Can't- Taylor's coming over."

"T-The weekend after. You're free then, right?"

"Um..." She shuffled around for a bit. "Yeah, that's free. Let's go Friday afternoon, because I don't need to study then."

"Sounds great. So, uh, I'll book a place?"

"Actually, I will."

"Fine. That's absolutely fine. Do you want me to come pick you up?"

"No, just meet me there already. I'll text you a place later. I don't want a repeat of yesterday- got enough on my plate already."

He bit his tongue. "Yeah, sure."

Silence.

"So, uh, how's stuff been?"

"Crazy."

"Yeah, it's been crazy for me, too. Practice, Theatre..."

She shuffled around again in the background.

"...essays and stuff."

"I get it. I've had loads of essays to do, and my Professor wants to move me into an advanced class."

"That's- that's awesome!"

She sighed. "No, it's not. Everyone keeps babbling on about it, which is really annoying."

"I think they're just impressed, Gab. It's a compliment, really."

"Yeah, well, I'll have a ton of work to do, and it's freaking me out right now. Not to mention other classes, not to mention my Law Club, the Debating Society... Honestly, I wish everything would just stop."

Not this again. Once Gabriella launched into another complaint against the speed of life, nothing he said could bring her to reason. God knew he had tried in Senior Year. But she would stare in a different direction, repeat her dissatisfaction... Do a complete 180 once his back was turned, leaving him dizzy and defenceless. It would be futile trying to contradict her now.

"Well... it's better to take life as it comes. You'll be fine."

"We'll see. Anyway, I have to go. Chemistry revision."

"Fine- talk to you later? We could-"

"-No, I'm too busy. See you the week after next."

Before he could respond in kind, heart sinking, she hung up.

Silence again.

He snapped his phone shut, finally accepting the call, lasting almost two minutes, had ended. No squeal of excitement, no terms of endearment, no chatter about buying an entire department store in preparation. But... that didn't matter, right? Maybe she was secretly excited, and would have shown this had he not ruined her revision time yesterday. Yes, she still wanted him to learn from his recklessness and once he wowed her in San Francisco, her excitement would increase. And, could he really question the intense pressure she faced at Stanford? He had neither the brains nor the inclination to do so. No, questioning her response was selfish. After all, it wasn't as though he had jumped through the ceiling at the thought of visiting San Francisco, either. In fact, after hearing the lack of excitement in his voice, perhaps she assumed the trip wouldn't amount to much.

In which case, he had better change his attitude!

That was easier said than done, though, particularly whilst browsing

extortionate train fares. His shift began in two hours, but without a truck, he would have to leave an hour early on foot. If he had enough energy afterwards, he could call Kelsi.

The store manager offered him either the 2:00 til 8:00, or the 4:00 til 10:00, Saturday and Sunday. For the sake of Calculus at 9 sharp on a Monday, he chose the former set of shifts. There went his reading time. By the time he finished at around 7, he could barely put one foot in front of another, but seeing a missed call from Kelsi roused him. He dialled her number in a flash.

Again, she picked up quickly.

"Hey, you!" Her warm, excited voice made him smile. "Bach or Beethoven?"

"What?"

A thousand violins seemed to be playing in the background, out of time, opposing notes clashing against each other, beautifully melodic.

"Choose quickly: time is running out."

"Er- Beethoven?"

She gasped. "Troy, Bach is the cake, and Beethoven the icing. Seriously, did you never listen to me in high school?"

"Er-"

"And don't say, "not if I could help it"..."

He laughed for the first time that day. Outside, the sun shone weakly over a soaking California skyline. It could have shone whilst he walked to work, but such was the way of things.

"You got me."

"Anyway, you okay? I got a missed call from you earlier."

"Ah yeah- I had to go do a shift. I'm sorry."

"Hey, you don't need to apologize. You sound exhausted, though. It's really nice of you to still call. I had an insane day."

"Involving Bach or Beethoven."

"Sorta. Actually, I was thinking more of who I'd go with on a blind date. Jack asked me. He's going to be disappointed with your answer!"

"I assume this is standard in a Music School."

She laughed. "Hey, don't judge us poor geniuses. Anyway, I didn't ask about your day- I babble a lot, don't I? No need to say yes."

The babble made him smile: her question about his day did not. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Yeah, had a great day. Thanks for asking."

People rarely ever did.

"Where do you work?"

"Drugstore."

"Lemme guess- lemon-scented soap and non FDA-approved constipation tablets?"

"You really are a genius. Anyway, I, um..." Time for the pièce-de-résistance. "Me and Gabriella are going to San Francisco in a couple weeks."

"Wow! Oh, that's so romantic. San Francisco? I love it- though I've never been. Right now, I'm in love with Toronto, but anything in California totally

rocks. I'm surprised you don't skip class altogether and just go on a crazy road trip every weekend. You still got your truck, right?"

"Yep."

He still had it.

"Oh, I'm so jealous! I bet Gabriella can't wait."

"Sure, she's... pretty psyched."

"Planning such a romantic trip... I mean, she's so lucky you care about these things. That doesn't always..."

For some reason, she cut herself off.

Someone in the background played a wrong note on the violin and several people groaned.

"God, I think my ears are bleeding," Kelsi said, apparently one of those people. Her voice had regained its excitement. "Guess who wound up at Juilliard?"

"Who?"

"Cindra Please Quit Opera Parselling. Seriously, the only thing that makes her an opera singer are her massive boobs."

He snorted, remembering Cindra's over-zealous performance during the Winter Musicale auditions, though he never thought she might play other instruments. What he did know, however, was that Cindra had since improved her singing technique. Out of loyalty, he didn't mention this.

"Anyway," she said. "San Fran."

"Yeah."

There was a pause.

"So? Tell me more! I want details. What do you have planned? I bet it's amazing."

He swallowed. "Sure..."

And he gave her a list of activities and dates that he hadn't arranged and couldn't afford.

"Oh, I think I'm going green- hold on- " She said something to someone else; to his horror, he caught the words "San Francisco" and "so romantic" repeated. Who was she speaking to?

"Sorry about that. Anyway, Troy, I need to pick up something for linguini from the fish market. Ryan says he can trust me enough to watch the spaghetti and cut stuff."

"Got any ideas?"

About to mention adding shrimp, the memory of yesterday's disaster encroached.

"Prawns, I guess. And tell Ryan I said hey."

It would be nice to speak for longer, if only on fish.

"Sure! Well, I'll hopefully speak to you later this week, but if I go AWOL, just poke me on Facebook. I'm always happy to hear from you."

And the funny thing? She even sounded happy.

"Me too," he said softly. "See you, Kelsi."

"Bye!"

But as he hung up without any piercing silence accompanying her departure, a heavy feeling settled in his stomach as he pictured spaghetti bubbling away with violins playing in the background. Disembodied joking and laughter, a sense of companionship. A feeling of raw dread as the countdown to San Francisco began, intensified when he considered the necessity of Kelsi's being delighted when everything went successfully.

Or, when he told her that everything went successfully.

Sighing, he dropped his phone. The abandoned tuna salad no longer looked appealing. Given his jittery nerves, eating wouldn't help.

Instead, he collapsed into bed, rubbing his hands over his face. No matter how wrong it sounded, no matter how often he pictured Kelsi's disappointment and perhaps even anger should she ever discover his growing web of lies, spun by someone she hopefully considered a friend, he was doing the right thing.

Friend or not, he was definitely doing the right thing.

Because such was the cost of happiness.

#### 4. Chapter IV: Rome is Burning

\*\*CHAPTER IV: Rome is Burning\*\*

\* \* \*

Coach Julius Andrew Waller.

The name was emblazoned on a blood red door at the end of the locker rooms. It could only be seen after plunging through a haze of fragranced steam and passing team members who slouched in and out of the showers with dripping towels hung around their shoulders, warning against knocking on that door.

Troy knew this- of course he did. Unfortunately, he had the popular knack of acting against his better judgement. Lying he despised, except when necessary. Confrontation he avoided like the plague, often leaving Chad to fight his battles. Whether those battles were real or whether Chad fabricated them was another matter. But confrontational lying- skipping emergency bootcamp with his team this weekend so that he could romance Gabriella in San Francisco instead- was, up until this blustery Friday afternoon, uncharted territory.

And his target was the titan of the CalBears, who made his father look like the Joker from Batman.

Taking a deep breath- impossible in these sweaty locker rooms- he knocked.

"Is Rome burnin'?" asked a muffled voice from inside.

"Er... Sir? It's me- Troy."

After some shuffling, the door swung open and Coach Waller filled the doorway.

"So Rome ain't burnin'."

"G-Good afternoon, Sir."

He nodded. "Bolton."

Waller sounded far too much like his father, too much like endless practice at East High, shrieking whistles, stomping sneakers and the odour of male sweat. And here he was, 1000 miles away, living the same life over again.

"Well, Bolton?" Coach Waller asked, tapping his foot. "Sure ya didn't trek here just to wish me good day...?"

Staring at the ground, he said, "Sir, I- I regret to tell you that I won't be here this weekend because of an important family business event in Arizona. I hope that you will understand."

Coach Waller scratched his goatee.

"It's- It's been planned for months, and my dad needs help preparing and everything else, Sir."

Still no answer. Damn it.

Struggling to keep his composure, he chewed the inside of his lip and counted to ten silently.

....Eight....

....Nine....

....Ten....

Coach Waller disappeared back into his office.

No way. The door would not be slammed in his face. He had heard horror stories to that effect before, but shrugged them away when Waller at least appeared civil. But that civility only happened long before the CalBears' miserable scoreboard results. Waller didn't believe in solidarity after a loss, but in lectures, pacing, hands on hips, and glaring at any team members who didn't seem sufficiently remorseful.

Just like his father.

Despite these comforting images, Waller returned with a newspaper clipping which he shoved under Troy's nose.

"Sir?"

"Go ahead. Read."

With a sinking feeling, he took the paper. It was dated today and had- Jesus Christ!- an unflattering shot of himself in the centre!

"CALBEARS CATASTROPHE- What happened to Berkeley royalty?"

Reported by John A Humble

Ever heard of the CalBears winning a penny at a tombola? After their illustrious losing streak this semester, one hardly thinks they could manage that. The secondhand team continued to embarrass California with another lackluster performance yesterday against CBR. True, they won this time, but only after Troy Bolton, pictured above, scored a last minute three-pointer. Indeed, that's all Bolton seems capable of, aside from being fouled and looking like a deflated balloon."

He chewed his tongue.

"Word on the street proclaimed Bolton as top talent from New Mexico, but ever since starting with Berkeley, he can only get his balls inside cheerleaders. Hardly inspiring. Needless to say, Bolton could not be reached for comment."

Jesus fricking Christ on toast. How many people had read this? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? He must be the laughing stock of the entire team- even the cheerleaders would stop chasing after him like a pack of wolves when they saw his awful camera shot.

Those vampirical photographers had certainly done their job well. A round of

applause, if you please. There he was, hands on hips, chewing his lip and looking anguished. Every notion of glorious anonymity was crushed for good now. Who knew journalists could be so vicious? Many of them had been wearing Cornell Uni mascots during yesterday's game.

Accusing him of being unable to score was patently absurd. So his shot against the Longhorns was disqualified, so he couldn't stop CUNY in those crucial last seconds- he had still done his best, hadn't he? To paint him as some- some sleazy layabout who conned his way onto the best team in California- What did John Humble have against him? No mention of Captain Ripper, responsible for team strategy and shooting guard, or indeed any other team-mate. Just him.

However, the idea of his family- his Dad, for heaven's sake- being disappointed in his performances hurt more than anything previously said. Chad's disappointment would be unconscionable; he would launch into sharp, yet accurate critiques of his technique. His parents' friends, who christened him "The Basketball Guy" would either be speechless, or find another Coach's son to adulate.

But the article didn't stop there.

"Coach Waller ought to be hanging his head in shame. Instead, he chooses to hang everyone else's. In a press conference last night, he puffed his chest and claimed that three CBR players should have been DQ'd and that the timing was rigged. In better circumstances, he continued, everyone knew his men were dangerous. \_

\_Indeed. Any more dangerous and Waller might be better off stacking shelves in Walmart. Meanwhile, the sponsors privately disclosed concerns about the CalBears' dropping share price. \_

\_Waller ought to learn from the Longhorns and Redhawks, who had a blistering battle Wednesday night, much to the delight of their fans. The unlucky Redhawks lost by two points, but top player Chad Danforth (also from New Mexico) accepted defeat with dignity and humility. His performance was praised even by his opponents. With more games like this, the Redhawks, previously an underrated team, will sneak up on the CalBears like the Grim Reaper. This would have been unthinkable just a year ago."\_

Chad Danforth, dignified and humble? The Chad Danforth, who kicked walls and swore after every loss at East High, accused the ref of bias, cursed this and that player for fouls (with or without evidence), and even claimed the cheerleaders didn't provide enough encouragement? Either he had been born again or his participation in East High's Senior Musical had improved his acting skills.

"So what happened? Waller had his excuses ready. In the same press conference, he whined about various elements that had created a perfect storm for the team.\_

\_Indeed. The alignment of Jupiter and Neptune bodes ill in the tenth month, and the great god Zeus has not sent enough rain. Out of the other gibberish, one does recall Waller blaming the recruitment of team members from outside the California pool, evidently a response to accusations of nepotism in recent years. But if the allegedly brilliant Troy Bolton can't play up to standards, then one must question the wisdom of sporty Affirmative Action.\_

\_In the meantime, let the funeral band play on as we cry CalTears.\_

Head bowed, Troy handed back the newspaper. Rome really was burning.

"Well, kid?"

"I..."

There was too much to be said, too much to be felt. His temperature rose at Waller blaming him simply for coming from New Mexico, rather than California. The same Waller who expected him to give 110% to every game. True, he knew Waller to be stern, but expected this to be tempered by loyalty. New

recruits were to blame? Waller told him during tryouts that he was talented for his age. Was that a lie? So he came from New Mexico, a state of no great importance in the basketball world. The world didn't revolve around California, a crowded, expensive and too-damn-full-of-itself state.

Waller scrunched up the paper, dropped and stamped on it. With his hands back on his hips, he seemed to be crushing himself; his fingertips turned white.

"You know, I've never met a journalist I didn't like."

Troy said nothing.

"They always smile, cross their legs, fancy themselves so very important, and excel in pretend courtesy until they get back to their office and write the exact opposite of what you said."

None of Humble's quotes about the press conference were untrue, but Troy knew better than to contradict his Coach.

"Humble, my ass. I didn't hear him crowing over us when we chewed up the Redhawks and spit 'em out last November. They couldn't look us in the face until January, when we ate the rest of them. Who the hell's Danforth? He better come down, we can show him some game."

Zeke always loved that catchphrase back at East High. Everyone loved Zeke's competitive streak, regardless of a win or a loss.

Before he could reminisce on more peaceful days in high school, the memory of him promising Chad to kick some Redhawk butt intruded. How foolish those words sounded now! Nonetheless, he remained silent. Even so, something inside him had changed. Not until he repeated the story to Kelsi Nielsen much later would he recognize this. In fact, his apprehension towards Waller had been replaced by a mixture of betrayal and reluctant contempt. It wasn't something he would ever confess; he was too polite for honesty.

For the first time since August, he realized that Waller was nothing like his father; the latter, despite his sternness, earned his respect. The former had just lost it.

He might lack an overbearing presence, he might even be Berkeley's laughing stock, but he still had some tricks up his sleeve. Years of strategising for the Wildcats had prepared him. Unlike what his parents' friends claimed, he had never considered himself the very best. As time passed, however, he discovered that he thought more carefully than most during the game, noticed things other people overlooked, predicted his opponents accurately, and made last-minute decisions that usually succeeded.

"Actually, Sir," he said, his voice losing its stutter, "a mutual friend told me that Danforth fears he'll lose to us in November."

Waller scratched his goatee again.

"That so, huh?"

"Absolutely. Chad- er, Danforth- is in training right now. Er, according to my mutual friend. He respects your leadership- and hates John Humble."

No sooner than the words tumbled from his lips did he cringe at the blatant untruthfulness of his words, but Waller could barely suppress a grin. Instead of squandering his advantage, however, he simply nodded and remained silent.

Tick.

Tock.

"So... Sir, where do we land on my absence this weekend?"

"We?" The grin disappeared. "If you can't reschedule, then you better work on the game in between your cucumber sandwiches and champagne. I don't care if

you have to steal a baby's bouncy ball and chuck it through a hula hoop all day. Work. On. The. Game. Minimum seven hours per day."

"Sev-?"

"Gotta problem with that? No? Good. Come Monday morning, I wanna see improvement. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Monday morning, 7am sharp. We're going five hours straight. Cancel any other lectures."

Cancel any other lectures? No, he could not argue. No more pushing his luck, for God's sake. Goodbye then, Calculus. At least that saved him missing an assignment deadline on Monday; he could submit his paper Thursday. Almost two years ago, he joked with Gabriella about getting kicked off the Wildcat roster. He should have kept his mouth shut. Craving anonymity was one thing, earning himself a dishonourable discharge beyond the pale. With John Humble hanging him out to dry in public, he had to keep his head down. And what of the sponsors? Dad might have mentioned it a million times, but he had completely forgotten- deliberately forgotten that basketball was money. Didn't seem fair, but Dad always said never to wait until life was fair.

So, he had to find a spare fourteen hours for practice whilst romancing Gabriella in San Francisco. God knew what she would make of that. The old Wildcat chant, "Getcha head in the game" played over and over in his head.

"I'll do that, Sir." Surprisingly, his voice was calm, decided; it had found a life of its own. "And thank you for understanding, Sir."

"Tell Ripper."

Great.

"Well, if there's nothing else-"

"No, nothing else," he said, repressing a sigh.

Waller jabbed his finger at Troy's chest. "Monday, 7am. Rain or shine. Well or ill. Nothing short of imprisonment or death will excuse you. Be there."

"Absolutely."

Prison didn't sound too bad. Think of all the reading he could do.

The blood red door swung shut: judgement had been passed. His legs turned to lead, his bones creaked. Still no excuse for Waller. San Francisco, Gabriella, fourteen hours of basketball practice, Gabriella again. Someone had to be joking. He heard a million romance songs, but surely none of them could match his own, where every move on the chessboard of life was pre-planned with Gabriella in mind. If she could somehow see into his mind... Sometimes, she didn't understand his explanations, seemed impatient for him to see her viewpoint. If only she knew that he tried his best, perhaps their disagreements would end sooner.

On the verge of leaving these dreaded locker rooms, Captain Ripper walked past. Any hope of escaping unseen and conveying the unfortunate news via email was dashed.

"Ready for the weekend, Bolton? Gonna be a roasting."

In a series of mangled sentences, he explained his upcoming absence, emphasising the fact that Waller had given his permission- though exaggerating the Coach's enthusiasm. He repeated the promise of fourteen hours' practice during the weekend, but did not mention that dreadful article.

"Well, well." Ripper dried his shoulders with a flannel, but water from his black, coily hair kept dripping back. "Fortunate for you, isn't it?"

"Well, I..."

"But, there you go. Dooley will have to sub for you, and his fingers are made of butter. It's no matter. I always believe that misfortune follows misfortune. You read that article?"

"I... saw it."

"Not a great snap of you, was it?" The corner of Ripper's lip twitched.

"Oh, that didn't bother me."

Ripper's face fell. "Well, if it's any consolation, the cheerleaders still think you're the bee's knees. You have shagged some of them, haven't you?"

"What?"

"I always suspected it."

"That's insa-"

"Oh, come on. We're all men here. I mean, you could share some of the goods, but I see you prefer to hoard."

"James, I have not -"

"I wonder what it would take for them to refuse you. I mean, you'd have to shoot somebody. An old lady- in front of a live audience. On her birthday. Man, they'd get over you then."

"Hilarious."

"You're a sly one, Bolton. Always pretending to be humble and unassuming, but secretly revelling in your apparent popularity. Be careful: you can't win over everyone. John Humble has a big mouth, can land a punch like John Shaft. You ever watch Shaft?"

He had, but didn't answer. This charade wasn't worth his effort. Time and time again, he insisted that he didn't hanker after the cheerleaders, nor encourage them, nor hamper his team's chances of getting (and keeping) a girlfriend. For Christ's sakes, he already had one! As for whether he and Gabriella had gone the whole distance, the answer was no- but not for lack of trying. Frustrated moments always interrupted by phone calls or other interruptions marked the whole of their summer vacation together. Not that he mentioned any of this; in fact, even Waller suspected him of downloading Gabriella's photo from Google. No doubt the team fed him that theory.

"Bulldog says you had a giant poster of yourself plastered over every wall in high-school. Why do you shake your head? My cousin plays for West High, and he can prove it.

"Actually, I had nothing to do with-" he said, but trailed off. It was useless.

Ripper jabbed a finger at his chest. "Work on the game, bro. Heads will roll if you don't."

On the way out, someone said, "What do you mean, Bolton gets to chicken out?" The words hurt, as words often will.

Wincing as someone else abused his name, he returned to his dorm. This weekend in San Francisco had better be a rip-roaring success.

His phone was buzzing on the table, but he ignored it. Instead, he opened the window, allowing a weak yet golden California sun to flood inside. Rubbing his eyes, he wandered into the kitchen for a snack. A protein bar would do, even though he had skipped his usual gym session in favour of papers, rent and rehearsals.

Over the last two weeks, Gabriella had sent him one text with surprisingly poor punctuation, saying that she had found a place to say. He had texted back, asking where, but she hadn't yet answered. Well, he discovered soon enough. Would have been better if she called, though- but no, she was studying. Chad had tried a few times on Monday, but it just went through to voicemail.

His phone buzzed again.

"Go away," he muttered, mouth full of NutriSystem's chocolate and peanut butter bar- his all-time favourite.

As if in response, the phone continued buzzing. It was Kelsi! Without thinking, he accepted the call, dunking the bar into his wastepaper basket.

"Hey!"

Someone yelled obscenities in the background before she answered.

"Troy, hello. Excuse the lunatic."

"You sound exhausted- what's up?"

"Everything." She gave a short laugh. "Just craving sanity at the moment."

"Don't you usually skip class and play piano for hours?"

To his surprise, Kelsi didn't laugh. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you."

"Me?"

"U-Unless you're busy- I tried earlier, so I guess you must have been in lectures."

Oh, he had received a lecture alright.

"No, I'm not busy right now. What did you want to talk about?"

As it transpired, nothing in particular; for some reason, Kelsi never stated what had caused her sombre tone and frequent pauses, but instead vented about essays and analysis and practice- the very practice she usually adored. He offered as much encouragement as possible, but sensed that nothing he said was registering. Why? Kelsi's cheerfulness never failed. It could rouse and uplift him like nothing else and ever since his appalling loss to CUNY, her chirpy greetings had kept him sane. True, calls had been infrequent since he told her about San Francisco, but she always responded to his Facebook messages with smiles and kind words as promised.

Meanwhile, Kelsi had fallen silent again, amplifying the lunatic's curses.

"Where are you, exactly?"

"Café Metro. Only place where I can put Pringles in my baguette."

Smiling, he said, "Why not head back to Juilliard, alright? No need to mope around off campus."

"Alright. But I have the coordination of a blindfolded toddler, so I can't phone and walk at the same time..."

He could laugh now, albeit without feeling. "You'll do just fine- you always do."

"I guess."

Another silence followed. Had she even moved an inch?

"Kelsi?"

"Yes?"

"Want to \_talk\_?"

"I \_am\_ talking."

Something jangled in the background- one of those doorbells that announced customers, perhaps.

Or perhaps she had taken his advice and was in fact leaving.

"You know what I mean."

More clinking and clattering. The crackling static stung his ears, followed by a siren. She must be outside now, heading back to her dorm.

And then the first song he ever heard from her came to mind. \_It's hard to believe that I couldn't see that you were always there beside me.\_ What if he were there on that crowded New York street with an arm around her shoulder, cheering her as they returned to safety? He saw himself, a hologram 3000 miles away, urging her not to worry, explaining that he often felt down and that the police car currently screeching around them might have been the one that stopped him not long ago. Maybe they could laugh about that.

"You still there?" Her voice was louder now. "I'm sorry- this must be boring..."

"Don't say that."

Alarming, more like. Breaking the ice with a funny anecdote seemed the best option, but he didn't know any. He could vent about his own papers, essays, and rehearsals, but since he had already painted a picture of bliss, he couldn't backtrack now. Besides, sounding delighted when she was downhearted would be inconsiderate. Then again, he could tell her the truth.

Yes, the \_truth\_. His mouth ran dry.

"I don't mind, really."

"Well, let me know when you have to go. Bet you have plans for the weekend, right?"

"Yeah- San Fran later today."

"Oh!" He could have sworn that she slapped her forehead. "Sorry! God, I completely forgot. Your romantic trip! Oh, I don't want to spoil \_that\_."

"Hey, it's no big-"

"-Don't let me interrupt you. I do hope you'll enjoy it- well, of course. \_Golden Gate City\_. Of course you will. I should have called another time, you know me. Anyway, I'll just-"

"-Kelsi-"

"-let you enjoy your trip. When you leave, that is. I'm very envious, because I always wanted to climb those- Well, it doesn't matter."

"Climb what?"

Miraculously, she stopped speaking. "I... Well, I've always wanted to see those musical stairs. On Pier 39?"

"I'll send you a video."

"R-Really? Oh, don't worry if you get busy and stuff..."

"Consider it done," he said quietly. "You need it."

She paused again. "That's- Thank you. I just wasn't having the best of days, and- Never mind, anyway. Tomorrow's another day, right? But thank you all the same. You're... you're incredibly kind. Never lose that. I know it sucks when people don't appreciate it, but... it's my favourite thing about you."

In the midst of his own stunned silence, he remembered her note. Thank you for taking an interest in my music and thank you for being so kind to me. The words of someone heretofore unused to kindness. Had someone hurt her now? The fact that he couldn't answer this question highlighted how little he knew of her; the chance to learn more vanished when they graduated from high school. Every missed moment, from the corridor to the cafeteria, heightened an unexpectedly strong regret. He told Gabriella once that he was friends with kids he used to pass in the corridor, but was that true? The thought of a Kelsi Willow Nielsen (he hadn't even known her middle name until a couple weeks ago) reverting back to invisibility, cowering before bullies and silencing her talent was unbearable now. It undid his efforts to realize her worth.

Did that make him incredibly kind? Nobody had ever said that to him. Not even Gabriella.

"I... thanks."

All the lies he told her stung him in the face like angry bees. What a poor repayment for her own honesty, which had evidently cost her!

"You're very welcome. I hope you and Gabriella have the best time. It'll be lovely: stars, orange lights... Take the leap."

Take the leap. That could only mean... No, he was jumping to conclusions, too rattled by Humble's slander, Ripper's presumptions and his own frustration at the distance between him and Gabriella. But Kelsi was right; Friday night, or Saturday or even Sunday night... If he played his cards right, they might seal the deal in their relationship and finally figure out their speed, outlooks, aims. Otherwise, he would have to wait until Thanksgiving, and something whispered to him that he couldn't afford any hesitation.

"Please tell me all about it when you get back, yeah?" she said, saving him the awkwardness of a response.

"Sure, I'll come armed with pictures and everything. You won't be disappointed."

"Just tell me you enjoyed yourself. That's enough for me. Have a good weekend."

She hung up, once again leaving him speechless.

Perhaps he should call back. On the verge of hitting dial again, however, he faltered. No, she needed her space. Then again, what if that didn't help, and he was too far away, too busy with Gabriella, to ensure she had recovered her spirits? This overpriced phone was his tenuous link to New York, to her life.

The sooner this Friday ended, the better. Team morale had taken a shark jump, Waller and Ripper wanted a piece of his throat, everyone else thought he was chicken, Humble had destroyed his reputation and Kelsi- poor Kelsi!- was wandering around New York, dejected and alone. He might have borne everything else with patience and some measure of optimism had he been certain of her cheerfulness and humour. Without it, he had nothing to grasp. She expected joy and romance in San Francisco, not knowing that the whole trip was planned in the blink of an eye, that he didn't even know where they'd be staying, nor Gabriella's mood when he arrived.

Perhaps... perhaps he shouldn't go to San Fran after all.

No! Jesus Christ, no. He shook his head and chucked the phone onto the table. Jettison his relationship for a low mood? Gabriella would dump him come Monday. Besides, Kelsi supported this trip and whatever the result, he craved a reason to call her again next week.

Nodding to himself, he packed for the trip. This was the right decision- after all, Kelsi had Ryan over there, not to mention other Juilliard friends. He worried too much.

Packing done, he wandered over to the window. A change of scene, that was essential. Down below, students scuttled to and from buildings. They were nothing more than insects from this height. The neat garden squares might have been coloured in by a child. After a while, he left the dorm. Once outside, the blustery wind whistled in his hair and whipped up golden, decaying leaves from the ground. Now the students returned to their proper size, and the coloured-in grass now swayed in the wind.

Come to think of it, Berkeley could be picturesque at times. Not like New Mexico, but good enough.

When he was within sight of the gates, he stopped.

That wasn't- No, surely not.

A few steps closer crushed his denials: Gabriella stood outside the campus gates, texting. Gabriella, in front of a purple Ford (good for her, she had reliable transport), hair blowing in her face and lips sparkling with that cherry or blueberry lip gloss she always wore. It tasted sickly sweet whenever they kissed (God, it had been so long since then!), but suited her. No, not sickly, just... a little overpowering sometimes.

Still- yes. Absolutely yes.

A moment, and he reached the gate. She glanced up and stuffed her phone into her pocket before smiling.

"Wildcat!"

His own smile, a mixture of enthusiasm and hesitancy, didn't stop him from kissing her. After a moment, they broke off.

"Welcome to Berkeley."

"Technically, no, since we're off to San Fran. Oh, you'll never guess what I learned about their law school- you can study part-time in the evening to get a JD. We're going to visit, right?"

"R-Right. Uh, yeah, we'll definitely visit."

She opened the boot, gesturing for him to dump his bags inside.

"Oh, and I need at least three hours reading time, Saturday and Sunday. So much course prep stuff to do. 19th century statutes. And you've booked restaurants, right?"

"Actually, I didn't know where we were staying first so-"

"Book some restaurants tonight. I literally want to eat my way through San Francisco. It's going to be amazing. Taylor's so jealous, kept pestering me on Facebook for pictures and everything. I mean, we're not even there yet!"

"Oh, how's she getting on?"

They climbed into the car. The upholstery was beige and someone in the radio explained the concept of quid pro quo.

"Great, aced her first tests. I'm headed out there next weekend with the girls. Oh, we're definitely visiting Lombard Street, right?"

"Anywhere you want to go."

She nodded and started the engine. As they pulled away, he couldn't decide whether enthusiasm or hesitation had the greatest effect. Either way, it

stopped him from hearing much of Gabriella's other effusions on food, law, friends, the good life, and her perpetual stress about all four. What he wouldn't give for \_her\_ stress! A few times, he added some observation of his own, or hinted at events in Berkeley, to no particular response. Gabriella would say she understood, before returning the conversation to herself.

Driving over the Bay, however, another thought crossed his mind.

"Where're we staying, Gab?"

"I texted you earlier. We're staying with my friend Simon."

"Simon?"

"Yeah, he has a place out there, and his parents are in Florida trying to stave off divorce. Better hope they work it out, or they'll sell the house and I won't get to see his jacuzzi. Plus it's his birthday tomorrow night, and he loves having guests. Win win situation."

That answer raised more questions than it answered. Now his enthusiasm subsided in place of a paralysing hesitancy. He twisted round, just in time to see Berkeley's tower fade into the distance. Perhaps he yearned for something further than Berkeley's tower, something 3000 miles away, too far to reach. Too late. He had made his choice.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Troy. Honestly. I hate it when people do that."

"Sure. Sorry."

With a quiet sigh, he leaned back in his seat. The voice in the radio sounded like a drone. Quid pro quo, quid pro quo... Come to think of it, this trip fit that description. He romanced Gabriella, and in return, she stayed with him. A contract without legal jargon, signatures or the threat of a lawsuit should it be violated. He glanced at Gabriella, his \_girlfriend\_, the only girl he had ever loved... She had the window open on her side, allowing the breeze to ruffle her hair.

She was beautiful, and God, why couldn't this be \_easier\_? Perhaps he would be better off shagging cheerleaders, as Ripper suggested. None of them could compare to Gabriella, so he wouldn't have to bother with romance or sacrifice.

Was romance sacrifice? Or was sacrifice romance?

No answer came to mind.

Except... \_quid pro quo. \_

## 5. Chapter V: Cracked Mirror

\*\*CHAPTER V: CRACKED MIRROR\*\*

\* \* \*

Trouble arrived on the wings of a bird.

As usual, Troy didn't realise it until too late, so eager to enjoy this trip despite every real or imagined obstacle. No sooner than Gabriella parked on Simon's terracotta driveway and switched off the engine did he jump out, as though expecting instant adventure.

"He should be in," Gabriella said, also coming out, "although he didn't text me back. Do you think-?"

The front door was open.

"Oh, is he going somewhere?. I did tell him we were coming around now, though, so maybe-"

Gabriella never finished her speculations, her voice drowned out by an entirely different explanation inside.

"\_-I don't care!"\_-

Troy raised his eyebrows and glanced at Gabriella, who looked none the wiser.

"\_-You didn't ask \_\_\*\*me\*\*\_ \_before inviting guests!"\_-

"What do you think-?" he said, but Gabriella shrugged.

"\_-\_\_\*\*I\*\*\_ \_pay the mortgage, the bills, buy you new clothes, and clear off your balances every month; the least \_\_\*\*you\*\*\_ \_could do is show some respect!"\_-

Sidling up to Gabriella, Troy whispered, "I thought you said his parents were in Florida?"

"I'm glad you don't trust me enough to have \_checked \_beforehand."

"Of co\_urse \_I-" He caught himself on the cusp of finishing that apology. They could not disagree- \_again\_\- so soon. Not on a romantic holiday, for heaven's sake. Even if hearing a woman shouting in a heavily-accented voice wasn't the auspicious welcome he had expected, he should have worded his question in a more polite fashion.

"\_-buying alcohol behind my back- I'm a \_\_\*\*lawyer\*\*\_\_, you know!"\_-

A male, American voice intruded. "\_Disgraceful behaviour!"\_-

"\_When can we expect you to grow up, Simon? Before the next eclipse?"\_-

"\_Perhaps when you go find your own place, you'll think twice about living the high life, son."\_-

"\_\*\*You two\*\*\_ \_will need your own places, soon!"\_-

Troy took a step back. "We should go."

"\_You\_ can go: I'm staying."

Her confusion didn't inspire much confidence, however, and once again feeling incapable of pleasing, he didn't move an inch further.

More insults flew around between parents and son. Neither would accept responsibility or yield any ground as far as the matter was concerned. Simon had no right to invite guests. However, Simon \_wouldn't \_have done so if not for his parents constantly slitting each other's throats. Well, that was none of Simon's business and didn't countermand parental authority. But if they couldn't keep a home together, why \_should\_ he obey their authority?

The sun floated further and further away, leaving dusk in its wake.

To avoid hearing any more personal disclosures, Troy gazed around the driveway for some diversion. The house, painted white, had the kind of shuttered windows he saw in rural French or Italian postcards. Further up were skylights- possibly for an attic. Two garages were squeezed together on the right, the further one considerably newer. Was it a sign of the increasing division between husband and wife? The fact that neither appeared to have honoured their trip to Florida didn't bode well.

Shaking his head, he stared at a nearby flower bed, but that was colonised by dandelions. They seemed out of place next to the spotless driveway, but perhaps nobody had time to tend the patch. Just like this marriage.

"...your whining won't do you any good. You better lose the guests."\_-

Lose the guests? He glanced at Gabriella, who was chewing her lip. Where would they go? The idea that they would be thrown out before even glimpsing San Francisco beggared belief. Perhaps a hotel nearby might take them, but at what cost? Good Lord, probably a million men planned romantic gestures for their girlfriends or wives which passed without a hitch. Just his luck that he should run into a snag like this, unprepared and isolated.

"\_I said, \_\_\*\*be quiet\*\*\_\_! One more word out of you, and you can go find a hotel for the night. I'm fed up of you!"\_

Before he could react to such motherly heartlessness, footsteps sounded in the corridor, and the very woman appeared.

Frown lines- plenty of them, engraved onto a dark-olive complexion- first caught Troy's gaze. She wore a black suit on a Friday afternoon, as though attending a funeral- the funeral of her marriage. Her brown hair, unusually free of grey, was unkempt. It clashed with her shiny shoes and manicure. Upon seeing them both in her driveway, her frown deepened.

"Oh, look at this: the guests have arrived!"

"I- we-"

Gabriella stepped forward. "Mrs Hofferman... we didn't realise that- Well, we are the ones who asked Simon if we could stay around- didn't we, Wildcat?"

Troy swallowed and nodded.

"-If we had known that this wasn't a convenient time- although we thought you were in Florida-"

Mrs. Hofferman folded her arms. "Hoping to get the house free, were you? I can't imagine a spoilt little Miss like you paying any bills, but your kind always think they can get what they like."

If Troy was speechless, then Gabriella might well have fainted. Annoyance he could have faced, given his success with Coach Waller earlier. But Mrs. Hofferman's outright hostility to the point of slander diminished any chance of enjoying this trip. Why stay here? Even a rip-off hotel would provide better customer service.

"We'll go," he said.

"I should think so." Mrs Hofferman walked to the newer garage and retrieved a Chanel handbag, then returned inside, slamming the door after her.

Silence swallowed them both.

"I'll... I'll book a hotel."

Gabriella shook her hair over her shoulder. "Where's the Wildcat's tenacity when you need it?"

"What?"

"Why didn't you let me negotiate on our behalf, since I'm the one who knows Simon?"

"Didn't she make it clear that-?"

"People change their minds, Wildcat- or at least they do if given the chance. Look, please don't argue. Just give me a minute to text Simon, see if I can salvage this mess."

Only with the greatest self-command did Troy obey this request. Evidently, Gabriella saw something he could not see, since Mrs. Hofferman seemed the last woman who would suddenly grant two strangers access to her home. How had he ruined their chances, given what they had just heard? Still, Gabriella said

so, and therefore he was better off silent for the rest of the evening. He hadn't the energy to decipher the eccentricities of someone he didn't know. Who was this Simon anyway, and was he worth the effort?

With another sigh, he wandered down the driveway. Evening crept across the sky, drowning out the light. He shivered, but within his head, he had a new vision. Somehow, he had landed 3000 miles away, in Café Metro. He had a baguette and Pringles... then he went in search of something... someone...

Meanwhile, the shouting carried on from inside. Several windows were open, as though the Hofferma's wanted the entire neighbourhood to know their family troubles. Did anyone ever come round, knock on the door, and beg for peace? For they must surely be heard from across the street, and yet the whole place seemed quiet. Perhaps everyone else was fed up of the Hofferma drama and had moved out.

The door opened again.

He turned, expecting to see an irate Mrs. Hofferma, demanding to know why they hadn't disappeared yet.

Instead he came face to face with a lanky kid, his pale skin clashing with a shock of dark hair. He had inherited his mother's frown, which deepened at the sound of his father still shouting from inside.

"Oh, piss off, Dad!"

Troy's mouth hung open.

Then came the clunking heels and Mrs. Hofferma appeared again. "You shut your mouth, or I'll stop paying for your- What are you two still doing here?"

He didn't have enough presence of mind to answer. But Gabriella stuffed her phone into her pocket again and shook back her hair, not a hint of remorse on her face. Of course: she must have asked Simon to intervene on their behalf.

"Gabriella's staying," Simon said. "We agreed it beforehand. You always bring your bone-headed lawyer friends round, regardless of what I think, and none of them are paying the bills, either."

"The answer is no."

"Alright, then." Simon folded his arms, glaring at his mother. "When you and Dad inevitably fall to pieces, I'll request the Court to let me live with him instead."

Mrs. Hofferma opened her mouth, eyes wide. Troy thought she would issue another blistering response. Instead, she said nothing for ten whole seconds. Simon had struck deep. He could not tell what lay behind those dark, bitter eyes, but the hostility she had shown them earlier had crumbled. Everything, from the suit, to the Chanel handbag, was a front. Of what use was affluence if your marriage was falling apart? Not only could Mrs. Hofferma not answer her son's threat: she feared the very event that he considered inevitable.

It is an unfortunate truth that urgent answers are often preceded by unnecessary silences. The tension that rippled through Troy's body as he watched Mrs. Hofferma weigh her options reminded him of facing Coach Waller earlier. An off-putting comparison, indeed. Tomorrow, his team would rise early for a day of drills, yells, passes, jumps, shots, whistles. Victory or defeat would loom before each player. It should be looming before him, too, yet here he was embroiled in a different battle altogether. A pathetic one. The lies he told Coach Waller now filled him with shame, even as he fought to justify them all over again.

"Two days, then get out," she finally said in a low voice, still staring at her son. All her anger had evaporated.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hofferma!" Gabriella's smile had returned, but the lady just gave her a look of contempt and disappeared inside again.

Before Troy could breathe a moment and digest this latest development, a chorus of shouting erupted from within- \_again\_. The word "\_keys\_" and added profanity, came from Mrs. Hofferma. In response, her husband insisted she buy a lanyard like every other damn sensible person. More insults followed this, none of which added to the mystery of the missing house keys.

"Sorry about this, Gab," Simon said, shaking his head. "They won't fuck off until next week- couldn't come soon enough, if you ask me. Sick of them."

"Don't worry," she said, though she kept glancing indoors. "Hey, look: this is Troy, my boyfriend. He's staying, too."

From the beginning, Troy's parents had taught him never to judge anyone at face value. This advice followed him throughout his life, upheld even when he received nothing in return. Bullying and irrational hatred of any kind disgusted him. He despised gossip, which destroyed the victim and gossip alike. As a result, the school outcasts became his friends, a reward for treating everyone as he would wish to be treated.

When he met Simon, a million wasps buzzed inside his body, itching to be released. Where they came from, he had no idea. They stung his insides, filled him with strange thoughts and a prickly sensation down his neck. When Simon extended a hand, the wasps grew angrier- he shook hands, then pulled away. His smile somehow got stuck and faded into a grimace.

"Pleasure," he said in a toneless voice.

Simon's smile, genuine but without the warmth directed at Gabriella, nodded his apparent agreement.

"S'pose you had better come in."

Gabriella had already disappeared into the corridor before Troy reminded himself to follow suit. The argument over lost house keys continued as he followed them into the living-room.

In better circumstances, he might have admired the airy décor, the pictures of seals and shellfish mounted on white walls, and the lino flooring. Instead, he gazed at a cluster of framed pictures on the mantelpiece, all featuring Simon with a golf club. Just like Lava Springs- in fact, upon closer inspection, he saw that some pictures \_had\_ been taken at that exclusive resort!

Small world!

"I like your shoes," Gabriella said, gesturing towards a pair on the sofa.

Simon laughed. "Yeah, cost a mint. I think they're French or something. Handmade for golf."

Golf shoes. The words brought a sharp twist of pain to Troy's stomach, a rush of bitter and mortifying memories. Those shoes weren't French, but Italian. He knew, because Mr. Fulton had given him a pair- the \_same\_ pair- at Lava Springs last summer, and Gabriella subsequently accused him of becoming a "\_new Troy\_". A social climber who hadn't time for dates and games with his friends just because he wanted a scholarship at the U of A. As a result, he never wanted to see Italian golf shoes again, and yet here they appeared with cruel irony.

The wasps inside him buzzed louder.

Mr. Hofferma, bedecked also in an immaculate suit, stormed in. His Rolex glinted under the light-bulb, but his eyes were a faded grey.

"Who told you to use my credit card?"

Just how many sins had Simon committed? Not that he cared, of course.

Simon rubbed his temples. "I didn't use your-"

"Don't lie to me. You think I wouldn't notice the \$200 gap? Look, son, I'm not your ATM-"

Repressing a sigh, Troy pretended to study a replica of Dali's Melting Watches picture mounted opposite. But that involved looking past Mr. Hofferma and listening in on another lecture, which was then worsened by his wife's entrance.

She was swinging a set of keys.

"Guess where I found these- right next to a stack of beers. But I was told that it was my fault."

Mr. Hofferma could not resist this direct provocation. "I believe that stack of beers lies right next to a new bookshelf we don't need. Talk about a waste of money- not to mention the garage."

Neither parent addressed each other directly or even made eye contact. Troy could no longer ignore either. To think this kind of snide non-communication occurred daily at the Hofferma residence! Surely, they ought to have filed papers by now. But no, this was none of his business. He turned away to the window, determined to focus on the view outside.

Even if it was fading into darkness.

A thousand lamp lights flickered on. But instead of warming a chilly city, they appeared as tongues of flame, devouring every building in sight.

"-think that I don't know your father's tricks-

"-Shut up, both of you for one  fucking-"

"-Ask the person who began this argument to shut up-"

He turned round just in time to see Mr. Hofferma leave, slamming the door behind him.

Mrs. Hofferma stood taller in her suit and shook back her hair.

"Melodramatic idiot," she muttered.

But Troy saw her bite her quivering lips before she hurried away to a different room.

Silence reigned over them.

"Well," Simon said, shrugging. He wore a Nirvana sweater. "They're gone. Good riddance I say. Yes, absolutely good riddance, and when they finally split, I'll throw a party."

He then bit his thumbnail, staring at the ground.

Troy, however, could not allow this lapse to change his opinion of Simon. For once, he was grateful when a subdued Gabriella asked Simon for his weekend plans. It dissolved any potential for reflecting upon recent events in such a way that favoured Simon. However, it also rid him of any opportunity to take charge in the weekend's entertainment, the whole point of their trip. Simon had nothing to do with them, and the sooner he and Gabriella went exploring in San Fran, the better.

"No party, I'm afraid. My mother grabbed the Jack Daniels and dunked it down the sink. Devil's luck- I thought she never searched under my bed. Will have to do with grape juice or something."

"That sucks," Gabriella said.

What? No admonishment to Simon for breaking the law in the first place?

"Still, she said she'd bake a cake- if she had the time. Dad says we could watch a movie, but only if his meeting ends early." His frown deepened. "No chance of that happening, so... Anyway, I don't care. War movies bore me to tears. Rather hang out with you, Gab."

"I'm sorry about-"

"It's hardly a big deal, we can go uptown, see Mandy and Jack- but only if they're not bogged down in papers, which is unlikely. How's Sasha?"

"Great, had such fun with her in LA."

Troy chewed his lip and turned away again. He should not complain, but surely Gabriella missed him that night? She can't have just agreed to head for LA without even thinking he might show up and might accompany them. After all, it was a surprise party, so Gabriella had no preparation. She must have intended to honour their date, which had been arranged beforehand, but was sucked in by the enthusiasm- and money- of persuasive friends.

Otherwise, he had gone all that way for nothing.

"So, who cares about a stupid cake and movie? I don't, obviously. Screw them."

For as long as he could remember, his birthdays always began with the smell of baked delicacies wafting from the kitchen, and then moved onto a heap of basketball-themed presents heaped on his bedroom floor, a sparring match with Chad, during which the latter always claimed to let him win, and a party in the evenings. His father would pat him on the back and tell him he was growing old enough to go broke on a mortgage. His mother would kiss his cheek and tell him that he was still her baby... And that was how every child must spend his or her birthday, surrounded by love and joy.

Except...

He shook his head before other considerations could intrude. In case he forgot why Simon had no merit, the memory of a son blackmailing his mother with impending divorce ought to rid him of any credibility whatsoever. Walking back to the window provided his only solace, but that couldn't disguise Simon insisting that no matter how often his parents neglected basic needs, he simply did not care.

"-Wildcat? Troy?"

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"You said you'd book restaurants?"

"Right."

"You want to come with us tonight, Simon? We won't mind the company; looks like you really could do with some."

When Simon glanced at him, he forced a smile. Again, it was short-lived.

"Where will the room be?" he asked.

"Upstairs, first to the right. Double ensuite, so I suppose you two can share."

Pretending this was completely normal and not a reminder of how much remained unexplored between him and Gabriella, he nodded hesitant thanks, and went to collect his belongings. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Hofferman appeared again, and the silence continued. After wishing they would stop arguing, he felt no satisfaction in the reverse. How could anyone, let alone him and Gabriella, develop their relationship with such strife hanging in the air? Could passionate embraces be genuine in a house where all love had fled?

Sighing, he slammed down the trunk and trudged back inside, his bones as heavy as when he left Coach Waller's office. Every lie he had told once again tasted

like ash. The thought of more lies to come slowed down his steps and sunk his shoulders in disgrace.

Yet... how could he harbour such regrets and weakness when he and Gabriella, the girl who seemed so hard to reach by phone, were sharing their first romantic holiday? Why on earth would he consider this fact, long-awaited, as an inconvenience- a source of dread, even?

No, no, no. This would not do.

Settled in the new room, he briefly noted its size and comfort. Before long, he pulled out his phone again, and with a will of steel sent Kelsi a text.

Hope you're feeling better today. In San Fran. Things have taken an interesting turn-

He deleted that last sentence.

Hope you're feeling better today. In San Fran. Everything going as planned. Talk to you soon, T.

Refusing to consider the implications of such false assurances, he turned to his laptop and found a suitable restaurant for Gabriella's expensive tastes.

His phone buzzed with a new message from Kelsi. All thoughts of Gary Danko flew out of the window as he clicked it.

Thank you for checking up on me. I'm doing fine now. Enjoy your trip. KN.

He read this a few times. No smiley emoticons, no exclamation marks. Her full initials, which she had never used before. The more he read, the more he fretted over everything unsaid and deliberated a thousand times. Should he-? Shouldn't he-?

Gabriella entered, dumping her bags on the floor.

"Right," she said, closing the door. "Not the best circumstances, but that's not going to spoil my weekend. I came here to enjoy San Francisco, so if we want that to happen, we'll have to stay out of their way."

"I'll book with Gary Danko. That will buy us- and Simon- a couple of hours."

"Gary Danko? Hm, I feel more like Kokkari tonight. I love Greek food."

Her eyes lit up, a sight which in better circumstances would have given him endless pleasure. Instead, he simply nodded and changed search item to Kokkari.

"Anyway, we're going to USF tomorrow, then Lombard Street. Oh- and I need my three hours reading time, remember."

"Sure," he said, thinking of the fourteen hours of basketball practice he had lined up. He hoped the dinner wouldn't last too long, so that he could wake early tomorrow morning, perhaps get in four hours for starters... His arms ached already.

"Then dinner, I think- and Simon's party of course. We can't let all this- She gestured with her head- "spoil his big day. So that's Saturday done. I've got no plans for Sunday right now."

He nodded, but his mind was miles away.

"Can we visit Pier 39?"

Gabriella waved her hand. "Yeah, sure."

For some reason, she knew where the sockets were, hung her clothes in a particular fashion, and left her makeup bags open on the bedside table. Had she been here before? When she crouched down, pulling a hairdryer out from

under the bed, he grimaced and turned back to his laptop. Well, many friends meant many sleepovers. Just because he had never heard of Simon until today didn't mean anything.

Watching her stride about the room, he felt a flicker of heat in his stomach. She had turned on a bedside lamp, casting an intimate glow in the darkening room. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, surely just waiting for him to stroke it.

Something was watching, waiting for him to react, to close the distance between them, but he had no idea how to begin. In movies, the man always knew. That was his template, yet somehow this didn't translate into real life. Perfect moments were always interrupted, or thrown away by distraction. What happened in his head didn't match his actions, and a paralysing fear of disappointing her in his haste and frustration caused more restraint than he probably ought to show.

But now...

"I'm going to shower," Gabriella said, picking up a towel.

He gazed at her lithe figure. "Alright."

The air grew warmer.

Gabriella then sighed, picking up a bottle of shower gel. "You know, you could take a little more interest in what I say."

"Sorry, I- What did you-?"

"You could... join me in the shower...?"

This was it- the moment he had sought ever since hearing- God knew what might happen afterwards but-

His phone rang.

Without thinking, he hit call, expecting Kelsi.

Gabriella huffed and walked off. "Forget it," she said.

He cursed.

And it wasn't Kelsi on the line: it was his Dad.

End file.